

GASTROENTERITIS FACT SHEET

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is an inflammation of the stomach and intestines. Viral gastroenteritis is an infection caused by a variety of viruses that causes nausea and vomiting. It is sometimes called the “stomach flu” but the influenza viruses do not cause it.

Who gets viral gastroenteritis?

Anyone can get this illness. It can affect all age groups. Your doctor can determine if your illness is due to a virus or something else.

What are symptoms of viral gastroenteritis?

The main symptoms are nausea, watery diarrhea, and vomiting. Some people also experience abdominal cramps (stomach aches), headache and fever. Symptoms usually appear within 1 or 2 days of becoming infected with the virus. Symptoms can last from 1 to 10 days, depending on what virus causes the illness.

How are these viruses spread?

Viral gastroenteritis is contagious. The viruses that cause viral gastroenteritis are spread through close contact with an infected person. It can occur by sharing food, drink or eating utensils. An infected food handler may contaminate food or drink, especially if they do not wash their hands regularly after using the bathroom. It can also be spread from touching something contaminated with the virus.

When and where does viral gastroenteritis occur?

Viral gastroenteritis occurs in all parts of the world. Viral gastroenteritis outbreaks can occur in institutional settings, such as schools, childcare facilities, and nursing homes. Cruise ships, campgrounds and banquet halls have also been affected.

Is this a serious illness?

For most people the illness resolves without complications. Gastroenteritis is a serious illness for those individuals at risk for dehydration (severe loss of fluids). Infants, the elderly and immune compromised individuals are most at risk. They may require hospitalization to treatment their illness or dehydration.

Can viral gastroenteritis be prevented?

The following steps will reduce your risk of contracting or spreading viral gastroenteritis:

- Frequent hand washing especially before preparing food or beverages and after using the bathroom.
- Prompt disinfection of all contaminated surfaces
- Prompt washing of all contaminated soiled articles of clothing
- Avoid ingestion of any food or beverages thought to be contaminated.

How is it treated?

Treatment should concentrate on preventing dehydration (severe loss of fluids). Your physician may give you instructions on what specific fluids to use. Antibiotics have no effect on viruses so should be avoided unless specifically recommended by your physician. There is no vaccine for this illness.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

All individuals who are symptomatic should remain at home until all symptoms have resolved. Individuals employed in daycares, food handlers and healthcare providers may be required to submit stool specimens to return to work. The Department of Health can answer your questions concerning this requirement.

Want more information?

Information about Gastroenteritis and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit www.dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9021.